

October 17, 1983

Rabbi Eugene Lipman
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Dear Gene:

About ten months ago you sent me an article by David W. Weiss from the spring 1981 edition of Tradition. I took a while to read it and longer still to get the chance to write to you about it. Part of the delay was that I found the writing style rough going.

The article is interesting and the conclusions make sense. But the line of argument does not, at least to me. The premise is that evolution and traditional Judaism are compatible. That may be so in the author's mind, but in mine it is a non-argument. For me, these are two separate ways of looking at the world with different purposes and different significances and there is no need to integrate them. For a lot of people my view is bothersome as it defies neatness and consistency.

The one junction at which people do need to join the two is when the uses of science present possible conflicts with the moral and ethical tenets of their religious or other beliefs. But this is a very different consideration from integration of the scientific and religious views of the world. Let me illustrate with two specific examples. Background material is in the two enclosed pages of the magazine Nature, a weekly magazine of scientific news and scientific papers published in England and read round the world. It is the British equivalent of SCIENCE, but in many ways a better magazine (that from an ex-member of the editorial board of SCIENCE).

The problem of teaching evolutionary theory has arisen in Israel as well as the U.S. But in Israel the Academy of Sciences and Humanities sponsored a public discussion of the creationist point of view as espoused by fundamentalists, Jewish and Protestant, alike. This official sanction of such views as scientifically relevant should have been avoided and would not occur with the sanction of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. Neither Israelis nor Americans do their young any good by confounding the issue. If young people are to understand both religion and science in order to live their lives with wisdom and responsibility, the distinctions should be clear. There can be no waffling about evolution; it is the single unifying concept in biology and underlies all biological thought and work. It has no religious content whatsoever.

The second Nature page shows in clear terms how the scientific community views Jeremy Rifkin. This is the same man who engineered this summer's manifesto by a group of religious leaders (including David Sapirstein) calling for a ban on genetic engineering in human cells. Other views of Rifkin are in the clippings from the Times and the Post. Yet Reform Judaism chose Rifkin to initiate a discussion of the serious questions regarding human genetic engineering (Fall 1983 issue). In fact, the bottom line of Rifkin's argument is not very different from the current assessment of many scientists. It is much too early to consider human genetic engineering, there is a great deal to be learned and many experiments are required on experimental animals. In the end, it may not be feasible or even the best way to deal with inherited diseases. But Rifkin makes the arguments with lousy science, misunderstanding of how biology works and with the irrelevant but eye-catching rubric about who plays God. How can people consider their own moral and ethical stands when they are not properly informed about the science? The scientific community in the U.S. has a heavy representation of Jews. Why didn't Vorspan let them open this discussion? Only a little scratching would turn up people with different opinions to illuminate the issues.

The most unhappy part of both these examples is that they will perpetuate the estrangement of the enormous numbers of Jews who are scientists from Judaism. Our community urges its young people toward such careers and then makes sure that they leave the community. Gene, its really stupid, especially as they represent the cream-of-the crop.

Give me a call if this is worth talking about. It would surely be good if you let Vorspan know that you have at least one really angry congregant. About the Israeli Academy there is little we can do, its of a piece with the problems discussed in your Rosh Hashonah sermon.

Best to you and Hazel Tov on the new grandchild.

Sincerely,

Maxine Singer